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ABSTRACT

Gypsy music is an example of the way Gypsies absorb and relate to the culture in which they live. The music that Gypsies play has two social dimensions. In the exoteric dimension, "folk" music performed by paid Gypsy musicians varies as to its rhythm, style, and content from country to country, year to year, person to person. Their nomadic life style and changing audiences have given Gypsy musicians the opportunity and economic incentives to constantly enlarge their repertoire. Gypsies also play an important role in preserving non Gypsy folklore. In the esoteric dimension, Gypsies will often play among themselves the same music they play for outsiders, as well as songs in the Romani language. The social context in which the music is played is the key to defining whether it is "Gypsy" or not. Music performed by Gypsies in the U.S. is a fusion of American and foreign musics and styles. An American song can carry strong Gypsy social and cultural connotations when played for a Gypsy audience. Similar exoteric and esoteric performance dimensions can be found in dance, which also helps to illuminate the interaction between Gypsy and host country's cultures. (GC)

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Gypsy Ethnicity and the Social Contexts of Music

In the following paper I will examine the socially situated meaning of Gypsy music performance, that is, the ways in which Gypsies use and relate to the music they perform.

I will explore how the performance contexts of Gypsy music illuminate the interaction between the host country's music and the music Gypsies perform.

I reject the approach of scholars who try to isolate "pure Gypsy music." "Pure" music is an analysts' construct having no relation to what people actually do. Instead, I will examine what Gypsies actually do; the music they perform and listen to.

It is time we scholars refused to accept Gypsy music as "borrowed peasant tunes". Music is an expressive act which derives its meaning from its performance context rather than from its origins. The sooner we examine Gypsy music in its social setting and forget about trying to isolate "pure Gypsy music," the more insight we will gain into the processes of culture contact. In fact, Gypsies are a living laboratory for the study of culture contact.

I will begin by sorting out the music performed by Gypsies according to esoteric/exoteric dimensions. Secondly I will analyze the role of Gypsies as popularizers of the host's music. Lastly I will broaden the issues under consideration to include

not only music but also other expressive forms such as fortune-telling, costume, and material culture.

It will be shown that Gypsies are manipulators of culture, that is, they selectively incorporate the folklore of the surrounding culture while simultaneously interpreting it and performing it professionally for the hosts. Gypsies have not assimilated, neither musically nor otherwise. They are neither sponges nor borrowers but are rather multi-musical and multi-folkloric. They are competent in many musical idioms and many cultural roles and they enact them appropriately according to the needs of the occasion. Data presented are based on fieldwork in the Balkans and the United States including Philadelphia, New York, Florida, and California from 1974 to 1977.

In the past, scholars presented two extreme views of Gypsy music: Gypsies were either hailed as the most authentic interpreters of peasant music or else condemned as corrupters of the folk music of the host. Gypsies were assailed as uncreative, imitative, having no traditions of their own, adopting songs of other peoples and distorting them. I reject this trait-oriented approach which would have us dissect the Gypsy repertoire to determine what is borrowed and what is not. Instead, I will look at any music Gypsies perform, regardless of origin, and see what they do with it.

Let us start by examining the motley material which anyone (Gypsy or non-Gypsy) has called Gypsy music. Consider these two extreme cases: I play a song which Macedonain Gypsies sing for an American Gypsy and he tells me, "that's not Gypsy." Yet

he plays a record labeled "Jewish freilach" for me and tells me, "that's Gypsy." Clearly, an origins approach is inappropriate for, to the Gypsy, the value of the music lies in its social setting.

It matters little that the tune is "Jewish;" the Gypsy relates to the music as his own.

Consider another example:

New York Gypsies meet for an in-group Saint's Day celebration and the young girls gather together to sing the popular rock-and-roll song "Torn Between Two Lovers." the Gypsies present become so emotionally involved that the women break into tears. At an in-group Gypsy event we might naively expect to hear only old European Gypsy songs but instead we hear current American pop tunes. Clearly, it is how people feel about the music which determines its social meaning.

Consider a last example: The music known on record labels as "Hungarian Gypsy Music " is really 19th century popular music composed by Hungarians but professionally performed in cafes almost exclusively by Gypsies for non-Gypsy audiences.[1] Among themselves, Hungarian Gypsies perform this music, plus a body of esoteric music consisting of mouth music (vocal imitations of instruments) and Romani songs.[2]

How can we begin to sort out this vast material? First we must abandon all effort to grasp a static essence of Gypsy music which unites Gypsies all over the world. Instead, let us call the whole constellation of material Gypsies perform "Gypsy music."[3] Gypsy music, then, is never a unified whole but a

constellation of various parts changing from country to country, year to year, and person to person. In other words, Gypsy music changes over space, time and people, and is extremely context-dependent. Of course, this is true of any folk music. In fact, most modern folk repertoires tend to be constellations. However, the Gypsy case is more dramatic because the Gypsies are so open to the host folklore. They are other-directed because they depend economically on the host.

The first thing to remember is that music means work to many Gypsies. Here I am speaking of the Balkans and Central Europe rather than the United States. Their attitude towards work is simply that it is a means to make money from the outside world of non-Gypsies. They do not earn money from each other. Thus they cannot be insular; they need the host to survive and are locked in an economic relationship with the host.

In all probability, Gypsies were musicians from the beginning of their world-wide migration; certainly it was compatible with nomadic life. But music, although it may be one of the oldest Gypsy occupations, is still only one of a great number of Gypsy occupations. A Gypsy's occupation depends on what is needed, what is available, what is profitable, and what fits into the Gypsy life style in a particular country. These conditions may change from week to week, month to month, year to year; thus Gypsies are extremely adaptable when it comes to occupations. Some Gypsy occupations have become let us say "traditional" or "typical" because over the years they have met the needs outlined above. Music and fortune-telling are

two of these "traditional" occupations.

Gypsies as professional musicians perform for non-Gypsy audiences for remuneration. In Eastern Europe and the Balkans, they play at native events such as weddings, baptisms, Saint's Day celebrations, fairs, and Sunday dances. At these events they are required to know thoroughly the native repertoire. They provide whatever music their non-Gypsy audience wants. They have become experts at their host country's music, often better than the natives themselves. In some areas of Eastern Europe their roles have become so specialized that they were the only instrumentalists available.[4]

Their nomadic lifestyle gave them the opportunity to enlarge their repertoire, something that was logical for them to do because it was profitable. One musician might know the folk dance tunes of three or four countries or eight or nine different cultures. Whatever the locality and the occasion demands, the Gypsy will learn. Thus, their tastes are eclectic and they may be called multi-musical. They do not passively assimilate the music and customs of the countries of their adoption; rather, they become competent performers, often to the extent of becoming the most typical exponents and practicioners of that music.

In addition, Gypsies play an important role in the preservation of non-Gypsy folklore.[5] They keep the host's folklore alive by active performance often after it has died or changed in its original non-Gypsy contexts. Gypsy folklore may preserve older strains of the host's folklore while simultaneously incorporating newer strains.[6,7]

Gypsies must naturally keep abreast of popular taste.

They have developed a sophisticated cosmopolitan shrewdness about public taste; they have refined the art of skillfully tapping the essence of popular culture. They become competent in the music of the host country, interpret it, and then sell it back to the hosts. For this reason, I would call them cultural disseminators or the original popularizers of music (before mass media).[8]

So far we have discussed exoteric Gypsy music. Turning now to esoteric Gypsy music, we find that among themselves, Gypsies will often play precisely the same music they play for outsiders, plus another body of esoteric music consisting of songs in the Romani language. These songs are usually not sung for outsiders and they often deal with typical Gypsy themes.[9]

Now, although there is this separate body of music enacted only in esoteric contexts, I would like to point to a broad stylistic unity in the music a Gypsy performs in a given locality.[10] The same performing features occur in whatever music a Gypsy performs, whether it is Balkan Gypsy song in Romani or a current American disco hit. The following list of performance features applies to the music of Gypsies in the Balkans and their descendents in the United States. All features are stated in comparison to the host country's music:

1. greater use of pitches not in the Western tempered system
2. a great deal of melodic variation from stanza to stanza
3. a great deal of melisma
4. a great deal of ornamentation
5. a great deal of vibrato

6. a great deal of improvisation
7. a great deal of tempo flexibility, including rubato, prolonged rests and syncopation
8. a great deal of emotion, shown by actual crying in songs and abrupt volume changes.[11,12]

These features apply to instrumental as well as vocal music. It remains to see how these features will map out onto Gypsy repertoires in various countries.

To further illustrate the exoteric/esoteric dimensions of performance, let us move from music to dance, using Yugoslavia as an example.[13] Four categories of Yugoslav Gypsy dance can be identified:

1. dances performed by Gypsies for Gypsies (esoteric).
2. dances performed by Gypsies for outsiders for money
3. dances performed by Gypsy dance ensembles for outsiders for no money
4. dances performed by non-Gypsy ensembles imitating Gypsies (Ciganske Igre)

As reported by Elsie Durin,[14] esoteric Gypsy dances consist of two types: čoček and ora. Čoček is performed indoors by segregated groups of men or women while ora are performed outdoors by mixed groups. In previous generations, čoček used to be performed by Gypsy women for non-Gypsies for money,[15] and in most accounts, the erotic nature of the dance is noted. However, the same čoček, performed esoterically, has no erotic connotations; in fact, čoček is performed under strictly segregated conditions-indoors, with the curtains drawn.[16] The same dance, then, has opposite cultural meanings in two different contexts. For the public audience, Gypsies capitalize on the erotic image of

the Gypsy which has no validity esoterically.

Recently, a new dance phenomenon has appeared in Yugoslavia, Gypsy dance ensembles.[17] In seeking recognition as a national minority, the Gypsies have followed the path of other minorities in publically presenting their folk music and dance. At recent festivals, the Rom ensembles presented highly choreographed, abstracted versions of Gypsy dancing. Gypsy dances were altered to conform to their idea of what a proper Yugoslav ensemble should be. All distinctions between segregated and mixed dances broke down. Gypsy choreographers employed theatrical conventions similar to other groups such as complicated geometric patterns. Among Gypsies, of course, none of this would be found. The emsembles dressed in costumes Gypsies would never wear. In general, they "put on a show" of what they thought the public wanted as Gypsy folklore. One ensemble even imitated what peasant groups do to portray "the wild Gypsies;" in other words, the Gypsies imitated the imitations of themselves by non-Gypsies. This clearly shows how Gypsies incorporate popular taste even when they aren't getting paid. In Yugoslavia today the motive has changed from money to political acceptance as a legitimate ethnic group. To legitimize themselves, the Gypsies have accommodated their folklore for public display.

Finally, let us examine the American Gypsy scene to see the interaction of the host's music with Gypsy music. First of all, in comparison with Eastern Europe, there are relatively few professional musicians among the American Rom.[18] The occupation of musician is not respected among American Gypsies although they do respect an individual's talent.

What, then, is esoteric Gypsy music in America? It is huge conglomerate of American and foreign musics and styles. At a typical in-group affair one may hear an old Russian Gypsy song followed by the current Gypsy hit "Feelings," sung in English or Romanes. To a Gypsy, both are equally theirs; it is only we academics who make a distinction. For dance music one may hear the nation's number one disco hit, followed by a Jewish freilach, followed by a Serbian kolo, followed by a Greek hasapico, followed by an Israeli hora, followed by a Latin cha-cha, followed by a Gypsy basso,[19] (a fast 2/4 tune in a minor key with a strong downbeat). Every young Gypsy girl learns to dance basso, a solo improvised syncopated dance with stamping, arm movements and clapping.[20]

In addition to dancing, young girls also sing both European songs, which are modernized in instrumentation and rhythm, and American rock-and-roll hits, sung in English or Romanes.[21] Sometimes the words are rewritten in Romani inserting common Gypsy song themes.[22]

Let us examine a typical American Gypsy performance context--during in-group gatherings at houses (or rented halls), girls of marriageable age are often required to sing or dance for an audience of Gypsy men. The performer's ability is judged according to stylistic features (mentioned earlier)plus non-musical features such as posture, how confident she seems, and how she looks when performing. This formal performance often initiates a discussion among the men about the girl's worth in terms of brideprice. In Goffman's terms, the musical event acts as a cue to initiate negotiation of economic and social relationships. Thus, a girl's father may suggest she sing to initiate

a discussion about her availability as a bride. Or else a Gypsy man may suggest she sing to show that he is seeking a wife for his son. On the surface it appears merely as a Gypsy girl singing a rock-and-roll song, but underneath it reveals a great deal about social relationships.

In addition to this formal type of performance, informal judging occurs all the time whenever young people sing and dance. Because the musical ability of unmarried girls is judged by the Gypsy public, parents actively encourage musicality in their children. I have often seen relatives informally instruct young girls and boys in dance. Teenage girls spend hours practicing songs and dances.

The most important parameter of Gypsy musical performance, then, is audience. The origin of the music, thus, matters little; rather, its performance is meaningful socially. When a Gypsy performs for non-Gypsies, he plays to the demands of that audience. When a Gypsy performs for other Gypsies, he activates a different set of performance rules and meanings.

Thus we see the same processes at work in the United States in the living room of a Gypsy family as we see in Serbia at a wedding, namely a response to the demands of the performance context, and a profound influence of the host's music on Gypsy music performance. In the United States, Gypsies have interpreted and incorporated American pop music into their own in-group performances. They fully realize that "Feelings" is an American song, but because of the significance of the text and the context, it has become a "Gypsy song," known, loved, and performed by them.

For too long have Gypsies been studied as a bounded group. Far from being insular, they are in continual dynamic contact with the host culture. In servicing the host, they present what the public wants. In singing and dancing as well as fortune-telling, they capitalize on the erotic and exotic image of the Gypsy which they consciously perpetuate because it is profitable. Gypsies derive their image from popular assumptions of what a fortune teller should be-- religious, spiritual, foreign, and exotic (ideally an American Indian witchdoctor, an African sorceress, or a Carribean voodoo specialist). A two-way process is at work: public taste dictates their image plus they mold public taste to depend on what they offer. In fortune-telling as well as music, they learn what the non-Gypsy needs and they sell it to him.

Now, what effect does this catering to public taste have on in-group folklore? It has a great deal of effect, but in selective ways. The underlying philosophy with regard to the host culture can be summarized as follows: if it fits in with

Gypsy values, by all means adopt it. This is true of songs and dances as well as languages, clothes, hairstyles, houses, and cars. But it must not conflict with core values; thus, neither socializing with non-Gypsies nor breaches in the taboo system are permitted. Gypsies keep up with the latest fashion trends as long as they do not break the taboo regulations concerning marhime (unclean) parts of the body.[23]

Gypsy folklore has changed for centuries and will continue to change precisely because the Gypsy is a master of adaptation and flexibility.[24] He takes the essence of popular culture and molds it to conform to Gypsy life style. In California he is the perfect Californian, in Serbia the epitome of a Serb. He not only adapts the host culture but becomes a perfect practicioner of it while retaining his own ethnicity. This interaction with the surrounding culture makes Gypsies unique and may, in fact, define their ethnicity.

Footnotes

[1] See Bela Bartok, "Gypsy Music or Hungarian Music?" Musical Quarterly 33 (1947), 240-257.

[2] For field recordings of esoteric Gypsy music in Central Europe see Gypsy Folk Songs from Hungary, ed. Rudolf Vig, Hungaraton SLPX 18028-29, and Romane Gil'a: Anthology of Gypsy Songs, ed. Eva Davidova and Jaromir Geinar, Supraphon 0171389, 12"LP.

[3] This approach can also be applied to other ethnic groups which have travelled among other cultures, for example, Jews.

[4] In the Balkans, certain instruments are played almost exclusively by Gypsies, for example, zurla and tapan; farther north, the fiddle is considered a Gypsy instrument.

[5] Jozsef Vekerdi, "The Gypsy's Role in the Preservation of Non-Gypsy Folklore," Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society 1 (1976), 79-86.

[6] Thus Bartok recorded many old Hungarian tunes sung only by Gypsies. Similarly, Kenneth Goldstein points out that in Britain, musical folklore in transmitted in large part by the Romanies.

[7] The term "preserve" does not imply survival in the static sense; all processes of folkloric transmission and variation operate in Gypsy performance.

[8] Some might call Gypsies promoters of "fakelore," (see Richard Dorson, Folklore and Fakelore (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.5) but there is nothing fake about this traditional folkloric process. The fact that it is a commercial venture in no way detracts from its traditionality.

[9] In the Vojvodina and Hungary, however, Gypsies publically perform Romani songs in addition to the expected songs in the host's languages. Hungary and the Vojvodina are perhaps special cases because in both places Gypsies are sedentary urban musicians in a rather stable economic niche. Because they hold a virtual monopoly over a very important commodity, Hungarian Gypsies have a semi-respected social position. (See E.D. Beynon, "The Gypsy in a Non-Gypsy Economy," American Journal of Sociology 42 (1936), 362-363.) They hold steady jobs and boast their ethnicity rather than conceal it. It remains to test the hypothesis that when Gypsies become sedentary musicians in a stable economic relationship to the host, some of the distinctions between esoteric and exoteric music break down. This hypothesis seems to hold true for Central Europe: in Czechoslovakia and Hungary the nomadic Gypsies have preserved the purely esoteric mouth music while the sedentary urban musicians have lost this part of the repertoire.

[10] See Alan Lomax, Folk Song Style and Culture (Washington D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1968), pp. 9-12.

[11] There also seems to be a predominance of certain musical modes; however, this would be a structural feature rather than a performance feature.

[12] Another feature, related to performance, is the Gypsy's ability to pick up quickly by ear tunes he hears.

[13] See Elsie Dunin, "Gypsy Wedding: Dance and Customs," Makedonski Folklor 4(1971), 317-326, and "Čoček as a Ritual Dance

Among Gypsy Women," Makedonski Folklor 6 (1973), 193-198.

14 Dunin, " Gypsy Wedding: Dance and Customs," p.323.

15 Dunin, "Čoček as a Ritual Dance Among Gypsy Women," p. 193.

16 Ibid, p. 195.

17 Elsie Dunin, "The Newest Changes in Rom Dance (Serbia and Macedonia)," Journal of the Association of Graduate Dance Ethnologists, University of California Los Angeles 1(1977), 12-17.

18 I am not including the American descendents of the sedentary Hungarian Gypsies, of which there are many professional musicians.

19 Recorded music is circulated among the American Rom on privately produced 8-track tapes and 45RPM records. Gypsy music is either recorded live in a studio or pirated from foreign recordings.

20 See Penelope Metzgar, "An Etnographic Film Script for the Dance of Los Angeles Gypsies," M.A. thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 1974.

21 Typically, the hi-fi will be lowered and a young girl will sing along with a current rock-and-roll hit.

22 Such as the bride who was sold to strangers who beat her and cursed her.

23 Thus, neither short skirts nor bathing suits are worn and pants are not worn at public Gypsy occasions.

24 Carol Silverman, "Gypsy Ethnicity: Persistence and Adaptability," American Folklore Society, Philadelphia, Pa., November 1976.